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## CROSSING BORDERS AND OTHER DIVIDERS IN WESTERN EUROPE AND THE BRITISH ISLES

Alexandra M. Kokoli

The task of charting artistic practices informed and motivated by feminism in a designated geographical area may be approached in two seemingly opposed but actually interconnected ways: as a flawed premise that would be in need of dismantling were it not already deconstructed; or as a provocation to entertain its (im)possibilities by attempting to trace rhizomes of shared questions, perspectives and practices. Taking the latter, more positive option surprisingly leads back to the former: the search for common ground reveals vital links and dialogues beyond the European border in a centrifugal spin. This chapter begins with an instance of the fundamental dialogue between European and North American feminisms, proceeds through a consideration of the decentering of gender in feminist art practices, and ends with a multi-lingual performance by a Greek artist on Turkish soil, in which both boundaries and their watery dissolution are put into play.

At the time of writing, the relationship between the British Isles and continental Western Europe<sup>1</sup> is undergoing seismic and, for many, traumatic changes.<sup>2</sup> Over the past decades artists, writers and curators have split their time between (mostly) urban Britain and mainland European metropolises, taking advantage of the diverse resources and opportunities of each location, including affordable studio rents, networks and differently

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<sup>1</sup> As a designation, the 'West' (a synonym for the equally problematic, trans-continental 'First World') has been the subject of much critical debate, from both post-/decolonial and anti-capitalist points of view. The transnational research, education, publishing, and exhibition project *Former West* eloquently argues why its 'search for ways of *formerizing* the persistently hegemonic conjuncture that is "the West"' is about more than nomenclature and could 'suggest the possibility of producing new constellations, another world, other *worldings*'. <http://www.formerwest.org/About>, accessed 2 March 2017.

<sup>2</sup> On 23 June 2016 the UK electorate voted to leave the European Union by 51.9% to 48.1% of the vote on a national referendum (Electoral Commission EU Referendum Results, <http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/find-information-by-subject/elections-and-referendums/upcoming-elections-and-referendums/eu-referendum/electorate-and-count-information>, accessed 23 February 2017). See also the Reuters EU Referendum page for live updates on the process and impact of UK's withdrawal from the EU: [http://live.special.reuters.com/Event/EU\\_Referendum?Page=0](http://live.special.reuters.com/Event/EU_Referendum?Page=0), accessed 23 February 2017.

international cultural contexts. Such professional and, inevitably, also personal arrangements are at the time of writing under threat due to uncertainty around the future of free movement between the UK and the EU following the results of the 2016 EU referendum in the UK, and also due to unfolding changes in civil society as well as government policies which suggest that the conditions that made the UK attractive to EU citizens may soon cease to apply. Conversely, the right of UK citizens to live and work in the rest of Europe (and vice versa) hangs in the balance.

*Keep It Complex – Make It Clear*, an evolving tool kit and events platform, aims to act as a source of inspiration and solidarity for all those who have ‘too many tabs open in [their] brain’ but want to use ‘art to have conversations with people [they] don’t usually talk to’ and not give in to fear and apathy.<sup>3</sup> Developed out of EU-UK.info, an artist-run Remain campaign in the 2016 EU referendum, *Keep It Complex – Make It Clear* explores paths of intersectional and intergenerational resistance to austerity, sexism, homophobia, transphobia and xenophobia from the point of view of socially-engaged artists and art workers invested in political involvement.<sup>4</sup> *Unite Against Dividers* (13-15 January 2017) was the third major event by *Keep It Complex*, co-ordinated by a transnational UK/EU-based group of women (Kathrin Böhm, Rosalie Schweiker, Divya Osbon, Harriet Kingaby and Beth Bramich, with a website designed by An Endless Supply), consisting of a weekend of workshops, debates, questions and networking to equip and activate the arts community after the UK’s EU Referendum.<sup>5</sup> The outlook, online presence and activities of *Keep in Complex – Make it Clear* exemplify an of-the-moment DIY entrepreneurialism, with highly successful crowdfunding initiatives and the dual deployment of their campaign slogans and designs on stickers, posters and T-shirts as both protest gear and merchandise. They also help introduce the three key strands of this chapter: learning from and referencing the aesthetics and methods of feminist protest in the recent and distant past; acknowledging but no longer privileging gender as the main (let alone sole) identifier of the constituency and audiences of feminist practices in art and activism alike; and a reinvigorated preoccupation with – and protest against – national borders in the face of a resurgence of

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<sup>3</sup> <http://makeitclear.eu/information/>, accessed 2 March 2017.

<sup>4</sup> <http://makeitclear.eu/impressum/>, accessed 2 March 2017.

<sup>5</sup> <http://makeitclear.eu/posts/3-unite-against-dividers/> accessed 2 March 2017.

anti-immigration and white supremacist racisms across Europe, and the global refugee crisis whose impact has been keenly felt on Mediterranean shores along the South-Eastern borders of the continent.

The following text is therefore organised in three sections, each principally addressing one of the strands identified above, although clear distinctions between them aren't simple to maintain. 'Transhistorical solidarities' focuses on the open dialogue between different historical moments in feminist practices and how it is activated in and through durational art projects. 'Within and against gender' examines the shifting place of gender as a category of analysis and a point of convergence for the constituencies of feminism, from intersectional complexities and digital culture to gender abolitionism. And, finally, 'Border Crossings' reflects on transnationalism in and beyond Europe, experiences of migration and diaspora, and their inflection through feminist art practices.

## TRANSHISTORICAL SOLIDARITIES

The series of collective readings of *I Want a President...* was initiated in 2010 in Sweden, by artists Malin Arnell, Kajsa Dahlberg, Johanna Gustavsson and Fia-Stina Sandlund in collaboration with Zoe Leonard, author of the text. Originally written in 1992, Leonard's manifesto-like prose poem famously begins with the provocation 'I want a dyke for a president' and proceeds to demand power in its narrowest and most obvious manifestation (as the 'leader of the free world') for the sexually and socially marginalised: the president should be someone who is HIV positive and has lost loved ones to AIDS; a deportee; a victim of gay bashing and sexual harassment; someone 'with bad teeth' and who 'has committed civil disobedience'. In the last lines Leonard rhetorically wonders why it is that a president is 'always a john and never a hooker. Always a boss and never a worker'.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Zoe Leonard, *I Want A President* (1992), <https://iwantapresident.wordpress.com/i-want-a-president-zoe-leonard-1992/>

In revisiting Leonard's text, Arnell, Dahlberg, Gustavsson and Sandlund 'wanted to gather activists, artists, friends and colleagues as a response to an increasingly neoliberal political climate in a country just about to give space in parliament to an upcoming fascist, racist and homophobic party'.<sup>7</sup> The Swedish general elections of 2010 did indeed give twenty parliamentary seats to the far-right party Sweden Democrats who thereby entered the country's only assembly for the first time.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, this defeat of progressive politics did not mark the end of the project. Malin Arnell's website lists collective readings of *I Want a President...* from 2010 to 2012 in cities including Copenhagen, Helsinki, Madrid and Paris, but such readings appear to be on-going and not always widely publicised, nor conceived as artistic performances. National elections tend to spark flurries of collective readings, and in the run up to the 2016 US Presidential elections re-writings of the text were also organised with the aim of 'initiat[ing] wide-ranging conversations about the original text by Zoe Leonard, considering what has changed and what has stayed the same regarding to horizons of "representational politics" since she wrote it in 1992, and what experiences, identities and social realities we still don't see represented in 2016'.<sup>9</sup> Leonard's text was also amended in 2015 on the eve of the UK general elections in readings organised by artists, where changes included the phrase 'I want an immigrant for a president' (with 'immigrant' replacing 'dyke').<sup>10</sup> The collective readings motivated a number of translations to European and non-European languages, including Estonian and Arabic, with or without amendments. A reading of the original text in English and Arabic served the dual purpose of protest and of marking the commencement of *A Stage for Any Revolution* by Alia Farid, a Kuwaiti-Puerto Rican artist who works at the intersection of art and education, developed through the Serpentine Galleries' Centre for Possible Studies/Edgware Road Project in London, presented during the Shubbak Festival in July 2015.<sup>11</sup> Based on an architectural model from 1929 by Constructivist set designer Victor Shestakov, Farid's 'stage' remained virtual, or

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.iwantapresidentdc.com/project-history/> accessed 2 March 2017.

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-11367622>

<sup>9</sup> 'DC Reading and Re-Writing', <http://www.iwantapresidentdc.com/>, accessed 3 March 2017.

<sup>10</sup> <https://iwantapresident.wordpress.com/2015/04/29/london-wednesday-may-6-2015-6-15pm-on-the-steps-of-traffic-junction/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://iwantapresident.wordpress.com/2015/07/04/london-saturday-11-july-2015-330pm-on-edgware-road/>

rather conceptual, and was only temporarily materialised in a series of collective events and performances, including a recitation on 19 July 2015 of *Anniversary—an act of memory*, a performance series in 60 Acts by Monica Ross and co-recitors.<sup>12</sup>

In the aftermath of the 2016 US Presidential elections, the content of Zoe Leonard's text acquires added urgency as its radical aspirations have never seemed more removed from actuality since its writing. What interests me more here, however, is not the text itself but the network of returns to it as well as other previous instances of revolutionary politics in practice, such as Shestakov's architectural model. Both *I Want a President...* (2010-) and Farid's *A Stage for Any Revolution* (2015) exemplify an 'intense, embodied enquiry into temporal repetition',<sup>13</sup> and transform any notion of homage to a revolutionary past into something altogether more dynamic, generative and complex. Theorisations of re-enactment in a feminist art practice have underlined the potential of 'temporal disruption as a space of possibility' and also, specifically, 'a space of learning',<sup>14</sup> while the archival turn in feminism in the neoliberal present has been convincingly described as 'an attempt to regain agency in an era when the ability to collectively imagine and enact other ways of being in the world has become deeply eroded'.<sup>15</sup>

The archive as valuable resource, model of collection, curation and dissemination, theoretical concept and metaphor continues to figure in art and feminism, both within art practices and as a driver for their preservation and celebration. Notable initiatives include *AWARE: Archives of Women Artists, Research and Exhibitions*, a non-profit organisation co-

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<sup>12</sup> <http://www.shubbak.co.uk/the-stage-for-any-revolution/>, accessed 3 March 2017. On *Anniversary—An Act of Memory*, a performance series in 60 acts of solo, collective and multi-lingual recitations from memory of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (2008-2013) by Monica Ross and co-recitors, see <http://www.actsofmemory.net/> and also Alexandra Kokoli, 'Remembering, Repeating and Working Through in *Anniversary – An Act of Memory* by Monica Ross and Co-Recitors (2008-)', *Performance Research*, vol. 17, no. 5 (2012) 'On Duration', pp. 24-30.

<sup>13</sup> Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (Routledge 2011), p. 2.

<sup>14</sup> Catherine Grant, 'A Time of One's Own', *Oxford Art Journal*, 39 (3): pp. 357-376, December 2016, p. 362.

<sup>15</sup> Kate Eichhorn, *The Archival Turn in Feminism: Outrage in Order* (Philadelphia PA: Temple University Press, 2013), p. 9.

founded in 2014 in Paris by Camille Morineau, art historian, curator, and specialist in the history of women artists.<sup>16</sup> In London, the Women's Art Library (MAKE), previously known as the Women Artists Slide Library (WASL), in collaboration with the journal *Feminist Review*, has developed *Art in the Archive: Living with Make* (2009-), a programme of artists' residencies with the aim of tapping into the performative potential of their archive as well as staging an encounter between past, present and future feminist art practices.<sup>17</sup> Albeit not confined to the visual arts, the Glasgow Women's Library (GWL), grew out of an arts organisation, *Women in Profile*, which was set up in 1987 with the aim of ensuring the representation of women during Glasgow's tenure as European City of Culture in 1990. *Read Out! Read In! Feminist Lines of Flight in Art and Politics*, a project initiated by artists Faith Wilding and Kate Davis, the Centre for Contemporary Arts (CCA), Glasgow, and Glasgow Women's Library, included the transgenerational discursive exhibition between Wilding and Davis, *The Long Loch: How Do We Go On From Here?* (CCA, Glasgow International 2010), a user-generated archive following a call from the two artists, and a series of consciousness-raising/reading groups that aimed 'to explore the question of how we have gone on, how we do go on now, and how we dream/ desire to go on in the future in response to a feminist heritage'. This expansive archive of texts, audio, video and images, in both its physical and virtual manifestations, was designed to offer 'a range of starting points for feminist lines of flight in art and politics'.<sup>18</sup>

*A Room of One's Own / A Thousand Libraries (Ett eget rum / Tusen bibliotek)* (2006), an artist's book in an edition of 1,000 copies to mirror its title, is one iteration of an on-going project by Kajsa Dahlberg, one of the four artists behind the 2010 reboot of Zoe Leonard's *I Want a President*.<sup>19</sup> The book consists of a compilation of notes that readers made in the margins of library copies of Virginia Woolf's essay *A Room of One's Own*. According to Dahlberg, the piece functions as:

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<sup>16</sup> <http://www.awarewomenartists.com/en/about/>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.gold.ac.uk/make/archive/orianafox/>

<sup>18</sup> <http://womenslibrary.org.uk/2011/06/11/read-out-read-in-2/>, accessed 10 March 2017. Unfortunately the digital *Read Out! Read In!* digital archive appears to be down at this time.

<sup>19</sup> <http://kajsadahlberg.com/work/a-room-of-ones-own--a-thousand-libraries/>

an analogy to the content of the essay where Woolf, using Mary Beton as her alter ego, is searching for the representation of women throughout the history of literature. Throughout the book she is describing, not only the search for literature written by women, but the conditions under which it was written.<sup>20</sup>

In its collective and transhistorical annotation by sympathetic readers, Woolf's inspirational essay is cast as an instrument of autodidactic learning, anachronistically contiguous with consciousness-raising, a method of feminist activism that wasn't developed until nearly half a century after the first publication of *A Room of One's Own*.<sup>21</sup> Dahlberg's book reveals that among the most underlined passages is this much quoted sentence:

For masterpieces are not single and solitary births; they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice.<sup>22</sup>

Dahlberg's book materialises this mass thinking body behind Woolf's single voice, a listening/reading body, who is also a writing one. The German-language iteration of the project, *Ein Zimmer für sich / Ein eigenes Zimmer / Ein Zimmer für sich allein / Vierhundertdreißig Bibliotheken (A Room of One's Own / Four Hundred Thirty-Three Libraries)* (2011) consists of a much larger-edition artist's book in 10,000 copies, and further expands the documentation of Woolf's readership from Berlin public libraries.<sup>23</sup> The readership of Dahlberg's books, all eleven thousand copies passing through many hands, makes for a dense network of virtual correspondences which builds on and exponentially amplifies those captured in each copy of Woolf's annotated text. In a repeated and revisited gesture of dialogue, learning, solidarity but also subversive rule-breaking (Dahlberg's primary materials were, after all, found in public libraries, where users are expected to minimise their personal traces on loans), the thoughts of a feminist hive-mind, at once

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Grant, 'A Time of One's Own', p. 373.

<sup>22</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1957), pp. 68-69.

<sup>23</sup> <http://kajsadahlberg.com/work/ein-zimmer-fuer-sich--ein-eigenes-zimmer/>



scattered and pulled together over the same pages, are printed, hand-written and re-printed and (re)circulated anew. Dahlberg's books are perhaps themselves being annotated as I am typing this text, lying in wait for a future feminist reader /writer/ artist to find, archive, revisit and revive them.

## WITHIN AND AGAINST GENDER

The diversity of current feminist art practices and discourses accommodates a vast range of perspectives and preoccupations, some of which may be clearly traced back to the 1960s/1970s, and some which appear to be new, although upon closer inspection may rather suggest new ways of defining what feminist art has always been capable of encompassing. Some strands tap into the power of popular (or populist) feminisms,<sup>24</sup> such as the amusingly named London collective *Desperate Artwives* consisting of 'female artists whose creative practice interrogates their experience of being wives and mothers and questions social expectations and values which frame this role'.<sup>25</sup> The collective is motivated by the realisation that the day to day care duties of artists impact on both their confidence and their capacity to undertake and see through the arduous extra labour required to get one's work into galleries, promoted, viewed, and reviewed, even once the artwork has been conceived or completed. Similarly, the international UK-based *Procreate Project*, 'a social enterprise encouraging and promoting the works of female artists who are mothers', strikes a delicate balance between a strategic essentialism that reads into the procreative capacity of female bodies certain social and creative predispositions, and a sober acknowledgement of the double burden of working mothers (artists or not), unsupported by publically subsidised childcare and adequate parental leave for all. So while, in the words of founder Dyana Gravina, art and motherhood alike are 'about expression, intense feelings, experiences, chaos, madness, profundity, richness, blood, love',<sup>26</sup> *Procreate* also focuses on creating infrastructures that aren't as unaccommodating or blind as the mainstream

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<sup>24</sup> My paraphrase alludes to Jane F. Gerhard, *The Dinner Party: Judy Chicago and the Power of Popular Feminism, 1970–2007* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2013).

<sup>25</sup> [http://www.desperateartwives.co.uk/Desperate\\_Artwives/About.html](http://www.desperateartwives.co.uk/Desperate_Artwives/About.html)

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.procreateproject.com/manifesto/>

artworld (and even pockets of the alternative artworld) to duties of care for which outsourcing isn't possible, affordable or desirable. Their initiatives include *The Mother House*, a London space for making and showing work for artists who are mothers with a collectively maintained childcare model, which started as a short-term residency in September 2016 with the ambition of being turned into a permanent experimental studio-cum-gallery space for people with childcare responsibilities.<sup>27</sup>

Such stock feminist concerns aren't consistently foregrounded nor indeed present in current feminist art practices in all their diversity. As a result, the reliance of feminist theories and practices on the category of gender demands some qualification, if not reconsideration, in light of recent debates in which practices and discourses heretofore associated with women's movements are deployed against the centrality of gender, and also of art practices which either superficially do not seem to be 'about' gender, or which intersectionally dethrone gender as a privileged category of social identification, its experiences, representations, and performances. In her curatorial statement for the exhibition *Feminist And...*, at the Mattress Factory, Pittsburgh (2012-2013), British feminist educator and writer on art Hilary Robinson explains that a definition of feminist art that hinges on women's issues is both limiting and misleading; the transgenerational and transnational group of artists brought together in the *Feminist And...* exhibition 'have turned their gaze upon aspects of the world at large that may not at first glance have been considered to be "about women."' <sup>28</sup> Informing this is the position that feminism is a set of politics, rather than based upon ostensible gender identities or identifications, and therefore can address all matters. All the same, for Robinson a keen attention to the gender-coding of both individuals and structures remains a defining feature of feminist art practice.<sup>29</sup>

For some, the usefulness of gender as a category of both self-identification and analysis is placed in serious doubt. The questioning of gender as a central or even meaningful category leads to two seemingly contradictory or rather highly contextual reactions. On the one

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<sup>27</sup> <http://www.procreateproject.com/portfolio/the-mother-house/>

<sup>28</sup> <http://mattress.org/archive/index.php/Detail/occurrences/298>

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Joan W. Scott, 'Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis', *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 91, No. 5 (Dec., 1986), pp. 1053-1075.

hand, the complexity and openness of earlier feminist texts and practices to the mutability and on-going dialectical or other (re-)production of gender in both discourse and experience is often misrepresented and underplayed by self-proclaimed queered feminisms, for reasons ranging from out-of-context misreadings to caving to the pressure to be novel, exercised by art and academic institutions alike. To Amelia Jones's proposal for a 'para-feminism', namely 'a conceptual model of critique and exploration that is simultaneously parallel to and building on [...] earlier feminisms',<sup>30</sup> one could counterpoise that feminism worthy of the name has always been both multifarious and beside itself, perpetually interrogating its own foundations and resisting fixity, even at the cost of instability. On a more basic level, attacks on gender and other identifications are often based on the assumption that identity is a personal issue and, furthermore, a question of free choice rather than being subject to power relations and a dialectic between autonomy and heteronomy. On the other hand, such challenges to feminism reinvigorate and test this key feature of feminism's radicalism: a refusal to put to bed some of the most fundamental questions, including its own *raison d'être*. If certain manifestations of feminism disenfranchise groups who share the patriarchal oppression assumed to be feminism's motivation, then feminism needs to be reconsidered, challenged, broadened, subverted, or (not so) simply queered.

Gender outlaws,<sup>31</sup> gender terrorists,<sup>32</sup> and largely post-humanist gender abolitionists<sup>33</sup> share little political or cultural common ground. Consisting of little more than its own Twitter-launched manifesto in 2015, 'Xenofeminism: Politics for Alienation' by the transnational

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<sup>30</sup> Amelia Jones, *Self/Image: Technology, Representation and the Contemporary Subject* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 61. On the differences or rather lack thereof between feminism and para-feminism see Alexandra Kokoli, *The Feminist Uncanny in Theory and Art Practice* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), pp. 61-62.

<sup>31</sup> Kate Bornstein and S. Bear Bergman (eds.), *Gender Outlaws: The Next Generation* (New York: Avalon, 2010).

<sup>32</sup> Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women and the Rest of Us* (London: Routledge, 1994), esp. pp. 71-86. The performance artist Rose Wood also describes herself as a gender terrorist; see <http://forward.com/culture/200341/bearded-lady-and-gender-terrorist-take-performance/>, accessed 30 March 2017.

<sup>33</sup> Francesca Ferrando, 'Is the post-human a post-woman? Cyborgs, robots, artificial intelligence and the futures of gender: A case study', *European Journal of Futures Research*, December 2014, 2:43, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s40309-014-0043-8>

collective Laboria Cubonics formed in Berlin in 2014, xenofeminism or XF announced itself as a post-accelerationist, neo-rationalist, neo-universalist movement that locates liberation in the abolition of gender (and, following that, also race and class).<sup>34</sup> The language of XF is unmistakably reminiscent of Futurist anti-humanism (which eventually embraced fascism), when, for example, XF unsettlingly offers (or threatens) inoculation against melancholia and similar 'maladies' of the political left.<sup>35</sup> Other attacks on the category of gender come from intensely embodied approaches based on lived social experience.<sup>36</sup> The practice of Berlin-based intersex artist Ins A Kromminga is informed by histories of otherness, especially configurations of the abnormal and the monstrous, by contemporary human rights advocacy as well as by gender-critical activism. They make drawings on a variable but generally small scale which, clustered on the wall, allow for diverse associations and bring together the private (of the location where this intimate practice on paper was undertaken) and the public (the exhibition wall), so that the personal may be read as political. Other times, their drawing escapes from the page onto the wall in dark swirls, like a monstrous infestation. Through their appropriation of abjection, Ins A Kromminga explores 'why is the outside(r) so scary to the insider, is there really a difference between in- or outside, and how can I draw it so the viewer might get a glimpse of how this leads to madness [sic] we call normality'.<sup>37</sup> In a similar vein to the reversal strategies of Kate Bornstein,<sup>38</sup> Kromminga retains the binary logic of the gender norm(al) and its monstrous opposites only to flip it: coercive gender conformity is revealed as the true monster.

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<sup>34</sup> For a survey and critique of accelerationist theories and practices see Benjamin Noys, *Malign Velocities: Accelerationism and Capitalism* (Zero Books, 2014). On the relationship between xenofeminism and accelerationism, see <http://www.furtherfield.org/features/interviews/revisiting-future-laboria-cuboniks-conversation>.

<sup>35</sup> Laboria Cuboniks, XF Manifesto (Trap) <http://www.laboriacuboniks.net/#trap/1> accessed 2 March 2017.

<sup>36</sup> See, for example, the bi-lingual (German and English) resource GenderFreeNation (GFN), which sees its role as building 'awareness and understanding' until 'classifications and segregations on the base of sex, class and race will become obsolete'. <http://www.genderfreenation.de/gfnneu/index.html>

<sup>37</sup> <http://www.abject.de/>

<sup>38</sup> Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw*, pp. 71-86.

Scottish artist Rachel Maclean also explores and exploits a visual lexicon of revulsion, operating right on the 'discomforting boundary between the sickly sweet and the grotesquely abject'.<sup>39</sup> In *Wot u :-) about?*, her contribution to Tate Britain's *Art Now* series, Maclean exemplifies a point of view that doesn't specifically address feminism but assumes and builds on an intrinsically feminist understanding of gender, body politics, consumption and visual culture. Her film *It's What's Inside That Counts* (2016), commissioned by HOME, Manchester, has been described as an exploration of 'the murky boundary between childhood and adulthood' where happiness and popularity, grounded in social media platforms, are both comically quantifiable and terrifyingly contingent. Riffing on the 'supersaturated, candy-coloured palette of children's television',<sup>40</sup> Maclean creates an ambiguous parable in which the material supports of the internet are thrown into relief. Mischiefs of red-eyed rats (all played by Maclean herself in special effects make up, as are all the characters in her work) are dressed in Victorian doll dresses and go on hacking sprees, gnawing on internet cables with literally murderous consequences, but are also easily seduced into adoring fandom by Data, the idealised social media persona of an impressionable obese cyborg. Intriguingly, Data's human fans pre-exist her: clad in dirty onesies and ripped up fleece dressing gowns, they appear as the only survivors of an unexplained catastrophe which left them bereft and zombie-like, pathetically calling for Data ('We Want D/data!'), and perhaps also calling her into being. The language of self-help is mined for its exploitative absurdity ('F is for freedom. The freedom to be beautiful.') and rendered literal with gruesome results: after being repeatedly admonished by 'Happy Man', a charlatan guru who turns violent, that inside her is 'a beautiful, confident woman', the obese cyborg is ripped apart for Data to be born. Yet Data turns out to be just as hollow or, more accurately, full of blue gore: her destruction is precipitated when the head-hacker rat plugs an internet cable into its anus. Although *It's What's Inside That Counts* is not looped but technically has a beginning, middle and end, it is insistently inconclusive and, after watching it a few times, I would describe it as disorientatingly circular. Maclean's meaty, bloody virtuality could be interpreted as a defiant response to accelerationist techno-

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<sup>39</sup> Rachel Maclean interviewed by A. Will Brown, *Studio International*, 5 June 2015, <http://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/rachel-maclean-interview-video-lolcats-britney-spears-scottishness-internet>.

<sup>40</sup> <https://homemcr.org/exhibition/rachel-maclean-wot-u-smiling-about/>

feminisms and an assurance that the carnivalesque and the grotesque are in no threat of digital extinction but will continue to mutate.

Just as Maclean deploys fleshy abjection in a decisively gender-aware analysis of (social) media, Quilla Constance revisits racist stereotypes with an attention to the making and unmaking of subjectivity founded upon feminist psychoanalysis which foregrounds the contingency and fragility of identity through identification, especially but not only gender identity. Through the invented persona Quilla Constance, aka #QC, British artist, costumier, cellist and freelance lecturer Jennifer Allen explores ‘points of agency for the negotiation of black female identities within high art and majority culture.’ ‘QC over-identifies with an “exotic” militant punk persona to traverse pop culture and interrogate category-driven capitalist networks’.<sup>41</sup> #QC is indeed both resistant to and highly evocative of categories, taxonomies and codes. She conjures up the repugnantly racist figure of the golliwog to disturbingly transform it into an androgynous trickster, periodically breaking into scat vocalisations mixed in with screams of despair and intimidation. Her video piece *Pukijam* (2015) scrutinises food as a signifying system onto which social class and ethnic identities are mapped out, from fried chicken in cardboard take-away boxes to tea in fine bone china cups. #QC’s invitation to the viewer to decode is so persistent that even an innocent root of fennel, playfully revolving on screen and chosen principally for its formal properties, as the artist explained,<sup>42</sup> made me think of the Italian homophobic slur ‘finnochio’.<sup>43</sup> Signifiers abound and overwhelm, until in a subsequent iteration of *Pukijam* in 2016 #QC’s eyes turn into QR codes, indecipherable by the viewer’s eyes and yet pregnant with withheld meaning. The live performance equivalent of this tension between opacity and semiotic plenitude can be found in #QC’s lectures, in which a rigorous engagement with critical theory devolves (or evolves) into inarticulate cries. Although clearly not ‘about women’ and

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<sup>41</sup> <http://www.quillaconstance.com/home/>

<sup>42</sup> Unpublished interview with the author, March 2015.

<sup>43</sup> <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=finnochio>, accessed 30 March 2017. The etymology of ‘finnochio’ as a homophobic slur is uncertain and largely apocryphal: <http://www.giovannidallorto.com/cultura/checcabolario/finocchio.html>, accessed 30 March 2017. To English speakers the slur may be familiar from sports journalism: <https://uk.sports.yahoo.com/news/sarri-possible-used-homophobic-slur-230100066.html>, accessed 30 March 2017.

possibly even not 'about gender', #QC's attention to the boundaries between sense, nonsense and different kinds of sensibility acknowledges the inflection of knowledge and its systems by the vicissitudes of power and identity.

## BORDER CROSSINGS: BETWEEN EXILE AND DIASPORA

A Turkish immigrant based in Paris since 1965, Nil Yalter's practice over the past forty years also challenges easy definitions of feminist art, especially when viewed in the context of 1970s feminist art practices. The reason is not simply that she usually focuses on the experience of migration and diaspora over gender relations, but rather that 'her main concern is less with representing marginalised perspectives than it is with problematising the nature of representation itself, upsetting the certainties of any one, single perspective.'<sup>44</sup> In this respect, *Temporary Dwellings* (1974-1977), consisting of seven archival board panels and six videos, announces its multivocality visually and discursively, through its combination of different media and methods of documentation of immigrant everyday life in three cities, Paris, Istanbul and New York. Yalter combines social scientific and poetic methods of documentation and representation, including interviews, text, detailed drawings and collages of detritus found on location, such as wall fragments and litter. The simultaneously attenuated and overdetermined relationships between migrants and place(s) are conveyed not only within any one work but between the multiple iterations of projects across different cities. The fifth instalment of *Exile is a Hard Job (El Exilio Es Un Duro Trabajo V)* is a durational performance/installation on a public street in Valencia, Spain, in two main acts: putting up large posters on which the same black and white photograph of a group of children is repeated in a grid, with some frames altered through drawing and erasure, and finished with the slogan 'EL EXILIO ES UN DURO TRABAJO' painted across in large red letters; and the painstaking removal of the posters, or rather their torn remains, soon thereafter. This work plays out Yalter's typical flicker between the public and the private, in which migrant experience is most accurately captured. It also articulates

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<sup>44</sup> Gabriel Coxhead, [https://artreview.com/reviews/april\\_2015\\_review\\_nil\\_valter/](https://artreview.com/reviews/april_2015_review_nil_valter/)

Yalter's view of living spaces as a shaping force on the human lives accommodated within them, and specifically her approach to the city as:

a space of transition along an axis of adjacency, or a point of intersection. The city is not only experienced as a physical reality, the sum of collective history, memory and memorials, neither is it reduced to a fixed fancy; rather it becomes a fluid signifier containing unexpected, incalculable, multi-layered interpretations and stories.<sup>45</sup>

At the South-Eastern border of Western Europe, Greek artist Mary Zygouri also homes into places of multi-layered intersections and different stories to complicate and enrich them further. Her performance at a defunct Istanbul hamam titled *Bath of the Constitution, 1911-2016* (2016), consists of a collective recitation in Greek, Turkish and Armenian of a composite 'constitution' drawn from diverse sources including documents of the Paris Commune, the works of Samuel Beckett and surrealist manifestos.<sup>46</sup> As well as intertextually mashed up sources, different registers and styles are mixed, and separate historical contexts are anachronistically mingled. The words of José Martí, heroic figure in Cuba's anti-colonial struggle ('A man who obeys a bad government is not an honest man'), are blended into the article on free expression, while the slogan of the 1989 elections in Poland 'There is no Freedom without Solidarity' concludes an article that grapples with the definition of humanity. Another combines André Breton's thoughts on automatism with the evangelists:

Article 22. Every human being has the absolute right of equality before the unconscious message, the wireless imagination and the unsatisfied curiosity. The right of free preservation of the memory of the disaster. 'Underneath the whitewash, everything is rot.'

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<sup>45</sup> Derya Yücel, *Fragments of Memory*, March 2011, <http://www.nilyalter.com/texts/12/n-l-yalter-fragments-of-memory-by-derya.html>,

<sup>46</sup> I am grateful to Theodore Markoglou, art historian and curator at the State Museum of Contemporary Art, Thessaloniki, for bringing this work to my attention, and to the artist Mary Zygouri for access to the performance documentation.



Each article is printed on a length of cloth and read out by a participant, who then hangs it from a clothes line. The sound of dripping water dominates the video documentation of the performance, a reminder of the site's original function as a hamam, and also of the pervasive cultural associations between cleansing rituals, purification, and redemption.<sup>47</sup> Once the recitation is complete, the performance continues in a quasi-mystical vein, with the artist collecting, washing and spinning the printed textiles with an intensity that suggests that her actions may magically contribute to the realisation of the radical aspirations of the recited constitution. Zygouri's work connects daily rituals with sacred ceremonies and affirms the multilingual and polyphonic aspiration of contemporary feminist art practices, their historical and archival preoccupations, and their questioning of boundaries and borderlines of all kinds. The video documentation of the performance opens with a resonant scene whose relevance may not be immediately obvious: a lone worker shoves a large bundle of plastics for recycling, surrounded by mounds of the same; in the next shot, jam-packed bin bags rest against old buildings. The viewer is firmly located in an old world, the Old World drowning in its own debris, tired, squalid and brimming with baggage it can barely contain let alone confront. Zygouri's ritual, a (wise) woman's work, suggests a material inflection to the feminist preoccupation with archival building, demolition and sifting through the rubble of history. *Bath of the Constitution, 1911-2016* proposes a new kind artist-shaman, the feminist washer/witch, a sage time-traveller unafraid to get her hands dirty.

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<sup>47</sup> Turkish hamams have also long been recognised as homoerotic as well as LGBT-friendly spaces, simultaneously mainstream and with distinct alternative potentialities. For a queer history of Istanbul hamams see Ralph J. Poole, 'Istanbul: Queer Desires between Muslim tradition and global pop', in Jennifer V. Evans and Matt Cook (eds.), *Queer Cities, Queer Cultures: Europe since 1945* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. 171-190.